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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

Jesse Jones
21 April 2004
Hot Springs, Arkansas

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: What was your motivation to join the State Police?

Jesse Jones: I had always admired the State Police and wanted to be a police officer. I was in the Merchant Marine and when I came out I began working with Arkansas-Louisiana Gas Company in Little Rock. Ads came out that they were looking to hire seventy-five or ninety new troopers. I put my application in. My father and family knew one of the judges in Little Rock and he gave me a recommendation, as did one of the Senators. I had several good recommendations. At that time I was thirty years old, which was right at the maximum age of getting in. I applied in the fall and they called me in for interviews. Then they assigned me to go to the academy in June 1957. There were about sixty-six of us in that class. The last week of August we were called to the situation at the high school in Little Rock. They turned us out of the academy a couple of weeks early. When they sent the federal troops in we were recalled from there and given our assignments. That was in the first week of September. I was assigned to Forrest City. I stayed there from 1957 to 1961. Then I was reassigned to West Memphis. I had a wife and

two sons. I stayed in West Memphis until 1963 or 1964 and they transferred me to Sheridan, which is just thirty-five miles southwest of Little Rock. I was there from 1964 to 1967 when I moved to North Little Rock. I stayed there until they established the motor vehicle inspection division in 1967 and I applied for that. They moved me back to Sheridan and I had three or four counties that I took care of and set up the motor vehicle inspection stations. I taught the classes to the mechanics too. I stayed on there until I retired. I had to go to Houston in 1976 for open-heart surgery. I was living in Hot Springs at that time. I had moved there in 1975.

ML: You mentioned that they pulled you out of your troop school early to deal with the Central High crisis. Did they give you any sort of preparation or instruction that told you what you would be doing?

J J : No, they just told us we were going to be working security.

ML: Did you have a specific post that you went to every day?

J J: I wasn't there for that long. They took us right back out of there.

ML: Did they take all of the State Police or just a few?

J J: Most of them because the federal government sent in the 101st Airborne out of Kentucky.

ML: Did you see any instance of violence or unrest?

J J: Sometimes you would see some of the whites heckling, but nothing violent or too bad.

ML: Your first assignment was in Forrest City in the Highway Patrol. What would be a typical day working in Forrest City?

J J: We had three cars there. We rode single in daytime and double at night. The two men that worked the night crew would come on about four o'clock and we would double over with the day officer until five o'clock. We would patrol the state highways and help the sheriff's office and the city police any time they needed us. We had two of us out at night to improve our security in We worked until four in the morning. If we had court dates we would have to get up and go in the morning. We assisted the counties in almost all aspects of law enforcement at that time. Later on they set up the investigation division and took the troopers off of investigation and made our focus highway patrol.

ML: Were you working twelve-hour shifts?

J J: No, we worked six days a week, ten hours a day.

ML: Was West Memphis different from Forrest City?

J J: Oh yes, there were a lot of differences. At that time we had a bunch of night clubs open along Interstate 55 in West Memphis. You had gobs of sailors out of the naval training center in Memphis. They would come over there to the clubs, which were wide open on Friday and Saturday night. There would be four units working most of the time there picking up drunks, drunk drivers, and quelling disturbances.

ML Sounds like a pretty rough place.

J J: It was considered the hottest spot in Arkansas. That was why you always rode double there even during the day.

ML: Was riding double something that was unique to Forrest City and West Memphis?

J J: Yes, it was uncommon. Most of the time though they had us training young troo-

pers. I think I trained fourteen troopers. They would put them with an experienced man and we would work together for so many months before they went to their assignment.

ML: Also during the 1960s, they were having a lot of problems at the penitentiaries. Did they send you over to any of those?

J J: Yes. I was stationed in Sheridan at the time and they had something like a strike and they called twenty-five of us in. I was close to Pine Bluff so I was sent over there. We went into the barracks and took over the penitentiary. I think there were a hundred and forty-four that would come out of the barracks and wouldn't go to work. I believe they had triple bunks that were really tall. It was a big, long building with big ventilating fans in the back and concrete walls. We lined up in front of the cages there and told them to come out or else. Two or three fired over their heads into the barracks, which had them scrambling trying to dig holes in the concrete. They decided they had better come out and we marched them out into the yards and talked to them and they went back to work.

ML: What prompted your move into the motor vehicle inspection division?

J J: I just got tired of riding the highways. It came up and I thought it would be interesting. They put a school on and I went and then started teaching the class to other mechanics. I taught them how to use light machines and set up the stations.

ML: How did the gas stations feel about this new responsibility?

J J: Most of them were real happy to have it because it brought business into their stations. Most of them went along with the program too. A few passed cars that shouldn't have been passed. If we got complaints then we did an investigation

and most of the time they would own up that they did it. Then we would suspend their station for so many weeks or months. We had to go by each station at least once a week and check their books and see if they needed help or supplies. We would train their new employees.

ML: Do you know what prompted the state to get involved in motor vehicle inspection?

J J: I don't know for sure, I would guess it came out of the Legislature. I know they wanted to stop broken mufflers and cracked windshields. People were just driving dangerous vehicles.

ML: Did they send you over to Hot Springs when Rockefeller took over and ended the gambling in Hot Springs?

J J: Yes. I believe Lieutenant Tudor was in charge. He would send someone in one of those gambling joints, like the Southern Club, and they would mill with the crowd and then go downstairs and open the door for the rest of us. Then we would come in and go upstairs and raid the joint. You would get everybody out and take them and charge them.

ML: Did you sense any change in how the State Police was run when Rockefeller took over and then put in a succession of directors like Lynn Davis and Ralph Scott who were from outside the State Police?

J J: Yes there was quite a bit of change.

ML: Does anything stick out as being particularly memorable or important?

J J: Not off hand, but there was a definite change.

ML: Is there a director that sticks out in your mind as being memorable? I guess Her-

man Lindsey was the director when you first started.

J J: Yes, he was a pretty nice fellow. I talked to him quite a bit. He was easy to get along with. I saw him nearly every time I went up to headquarters to get my car serviced. He let his Captains and Lieutenants run the show.

ML: Did that sort of independence change when Ralph Scott became director?

J J: Yes, he changed quite a few things at headquarters. They still run along pretty much like they always have.

ML: Since you were working in the vehicle inspection division, were you still called out on wrecks?

J J: If they needed us they would call us.

ML: Are there any other State Police officers that stick out as being particularly memorable?

J J: I had a lot of respect for my Sergeant at Forrest City. Later on he became sheriff in Poinsett County. I really liked Captain Gene Donham. He was a hard worker when he was on the road and when he became Captain. He always looked out for his troopers.

ML: I guess Captain Donham was overseeing the Little Rock district, did you see that Captain Donham ran his troop fairly independently from the director?

J J: I think [Assistant Director] Colonel Delong had a lot to do with it.

ML: In the 1960s the State Police hired the first black trooper. Do you remember what the attitude of the rank and file was towards this?

J J: I never heard anything negative about it.

ML: Right as you were retiring they hired the first female. Do you remember any dis-

cussion within the State Police about hiring females?

J J: Yes, there was some discussion there. Most of the guys I knew were afraid they would get hurt. You know I was hurt twice fighting drunks. I got my number four and five discs blown. I hurt the first one down at Sheridan in 1964. The other one was in 1972 in Hot Springs.

ML: What happened in Sheridan?

J J: I was chasing a car about a hundred miles an hour out of Sheridan toward Little Rock. He turned off on a gravel road. I knew that the road went down a couple of miles and dead ended. I followed him and when he saw the trees at the end he drove off the right side into a real sloping ditch. His car was at an angle with the driver's side higher than the passenger side. I put my car in right behind him with my spotlight shining into the back window. I was afraid that he was going to hit the woods on me so I was in a hurry to get out of my car. My car door was real heavy, especially when I was almost sideways. I pushed real hard to get it open and just when I got out my gun and holster hung in the steering wheel and held me back. When that happened the door fell on me and it felt like someone stuck a cigarette butt to my back. My adrenaline was flowing so I went on out and got him out of the car. It turned out he was just a drunk driver. I took him to jail and went to bed about two o'clock in the morning. The next day I couldn't get out of bed. I had to roll out of bed and go to the hospital. They put me in traction and kept me there for two or three weeks until I finally got better. Every time the weather turned cold it would flare up. In 1972 when I was in Hot Springs, a drunk ran into a service station and I turned around to get him. When he saw me

turn around he ran inside the service station. I came up behind him and we got to scuffling. I was going around the fender of the car with him in one hand and the fender in the other when I stepped in a puddle of oil. My foot went out from under me and I hurt the other disc. One of the reasons I got out of Highway Patrol and into vehicle inspection was that I just couldn't fight those drunks anymore. Then I had heart trouble in 1976 and went to have open-heart surgery and got on disability.

ML: Did you find that you would get in more fights in certain areas?

J J: Sure. You always got into trouble at West Memphis. Me and another trooper, John Haynes, had eleven drunks pulled over on the side of the road. We rode together a lot. We had six in one car and five in another pulled over at the base of the Arkansas bridge. We were searching them and called for another car to help us carry them in. One of the guys said he was going to knock the hell out of John. John had just turned to call for another car to help us carry them to jail. So I hit him and he hit the corner of the fender. It was over after that. His buddies told him, "man, you shouldn't have done that."

ML: Do you think that people were more willing to fight the police in the 1960s rather than in the 1970s?

J J: I don't think people started really disrespecting police officers until the 1970s. Now they spit in your face. When I first became a trooper if they spit in your face you could do something about it and you can't now.

ML: Do you think the court system is different?

J J: Yes. They have so many offenders due to drug arrests it clogs the system. I

worked probably a thousand accidents and wore out fifteen cars without ever putting a dent in one. I was real proud of that. Of course, there were a couple of times I didn't think I was going to make that.

ML: Was there a particular car that sticks out as being memorable?

J J: The first one I had. It was a 1957 Ford Interceptor. It was a running machine. It would top out at about one hundred and thirty-two miles per hour. The first car I had with air conditioning was a 1962 or 1963.

ML: Are there any other changes in technology or equipment that sticks out as being important?

J J: They changed the lights. It used to be red and then they went to blue. We used to have different paint jobs. They had white sides and blue everywhere else. I think it costs more money to have them painted this way and by going to all white with decals you can reduce costs.

ML: What was your relationship with the sheriffs?

J J: Mine was always good. Our job was to assist them when they needed help. In a big county though you don't have anything to do with them and you rarely see them unless you have coffee together. In Crittenden County, we took most of our prisoners to the Marion city jail. It was a big three-story jail that could hold a lot of prisoners. Sheridan was in a little county and the sheriff might have just a single deputy or a town marshal in Sheridan he could call on. You would help them much more.

ML: You served in larger cities and small communities, did the different communities view the State Police differently? I have heard that in rural communities the State

Police becomes a part of the community compared to a bigger city.

J J: That is true. In Forrest City there is a lot of rural areas that grew cotton. In the rural areas there would be colored nightclubs and on Saturday night we would team up and go out to one of them and help the sheriff if they had any trouble. If they did, we would go in with sawed off shotguns and tell them to line up. We would take all of their pistols and knives away from them and you wouldn't have any more trouble from them. We didn't have any problems in these situations. They respected us. They would call us "Cap'n." The owners of the nightclub would love for you to show up and walk around. We had a good relationship with the rural population.

ML: Later on in Forrest City, serious problems developed between the black and white community. Did you sense any of these problems when you were there in the early 1960s?

J J: We never had any more problems with blacks than we did with whites in Forrest City. I didn't sense any animosity between them, but maybe there was.

ML: Are there any traffic stops or accidents that you worked in your career that stick out as being particularly memorable?

J J: About one thirty in the morning I was patrolling my route from Sheridan into Pine Bluff. I went on into the edge of Pine Bluff on Highway 67 when I saw a Little Rock taxicab. I thought that it was a strange hour to be seeing a Little Rock cab in Pine Bluff. So I turned around. When I did this the driver took off and ran into a service station restroom. He left his two passengers in the car. When I got up to the cab one of the passengers was stuffing something under the seat and the other

one was asleep. At about eleven o'clock that night there was an armed robbery at a Kroger Store in North Little Rock. It turns out that this guy was stuffing a thirty-eight [caliber revolver] under the seat. I got them out and handcuffed them and the driver of the cab came out of the restroom. He said, "Man, I never was so glad to see you in all of my life. When you turned around I knew you were coming after me. I wanted to get out of that car. Those guys had guns and they were making me drive them everywhere." [laughs] They had money in every pocket and each had a thirty-eight revolver.

[End of Interview]

[JD]